

Paul Schimmel's "Someone Saved My Life Today"

Reviewed by: Catharine Bailey

Paul Schimmel's recent book titled 'Someone saved my Life Today' highlights his gifts as a poet, philosopher, psychoanalyst and psychiatrist. Throughout the book he shows us how psychoanalytic thought can be viewed through many different lenses. This is a book that can be read straight through from cover to cover, or dipped into and returned to later. It is both enjoyable and informative.

If you are in the mood for poetry, the chapters on W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett are a wonderful read. Paul reflects on how these poets used poetry as a way of making meaning of their lives, and that poetry has been used as a form of self-analysis for centuries. It occurred to me while reading these chapters, that the phrase 'soul searching' has added meaning when it comes to reading or writing poetry.

Turning to the chapter on Yeats, there is a poignant sense of an unfinished life, as if life itself was a 'preparation for something that never happens.' Yeats had a lifelong preoccupation with idealised romantic love, and his poems seemed to serve the dual purpose of an essential creative source of renewal, and a place where he could be protected or 'masked' against fragmentation of the self.

T.S. Elliot's famous poem 'The Waste Land,' appears to represent a destructive place in the poet's mind where the various characters in different situations reveal his own fragmented self. Perhaps due to a belief in the creative energy of his poetry, Elliot seemed to find contentment at the end of his life.

In another chapter Paul reflects on Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot,' and adds a beautiful and poignant poem of his own that captures the humanity of the play. Interestingly Beckett also underwent a 2 year analysis with Bion following the sudden death of his father.

Interwoven amongst the chapters on the poets, Paul deftly weaves his thoughts about psychoanalysis together with ideas on philosophy and psychiatry. I recall reading Paul's psychiatry paper 'Medicine and the Manic Defence' [1998] for the first time many years ago, where he discusses the reductionist 'manic defence' or quick fix approach of biological psychiatry, compared to the long term approach of psychotherapy. In psychotherapy therapists are frequently faced with the reality of their own frustration in hoping that the patient will recover quickly. No doubt rapid interventions are required to save lives in psychiatry, but this isn't the end of the patient's story. Many, if not most patients with mental illnesses tend to recover slowly if at all and Paul's paper continues to echo my own thoughts on this subject today. Some of these ideas are pick up again and reflected on in the next chapter 'Psychoanalysis; What is it and why is it hated.' [2009] In a more philosophical vein Paul devotes two chapters to 'Mind over matter; Philosophical aspects of the mind – brain problem' [2001] where he presents the historical and contemporary perspectives of this vexed question, and 'Mind over matter? Implications for psychiatry'[2001].

I haven't touched on the chapters on Freud and a few others, but I recommend that the reader experience for themselves this wonderful book.

Finally I wondered about the title 'Someone Saved my Life Today,' and have come to the conclusion that Paul highlighted in so many ways, that it is ourselves who possess the creative healing energy. Perhaps we can begin some of this healing process through poetry, philosophy, psychoanalysis and more; but ultimately it is ourselves that save us in the end. To my mind the meaning of saving myself involves a leap of faith when all hope has gone, and I think that this is aptly implied in the title.

(Paul's book is published by International Psychoanalytic Books in New York. Copies are available from him at: pschimmel51@gmail.com The cost is AUD40 plus postage within Australia.)